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ABSTRACT

This paper, which focuses on access and enrollment at community colleges, is part of a series published by the Center for Community College Policy, designed to support state and local policymakers, as well as educational leaders who are interested in policy issues related to the two-year postsecondary sector. While some students plan on earning a terminal associate degree and others plan to transfer to a four-year institution, there are other students for whom the community college represents their last best hope for postsecondary education. Community colleges offer these students an opportunity to start over and improve their employability by learning specific skills. Ideally, community colleges serve as a vehicle leading to self-sufficiency for those on welfare or otherwise in need of support. The "open door" policy of community colleges is threatened due to declining investments and concurrent rising enrollment. Some of the policy recommendations explored in this paper address enrollment, student outcomes, funding policies, remedial education, and restricting enrollment in favor of those students who do not already possess a degree. Information about contacting specific community colleges cited as examples in this document are included along with references. (Contains 10 references.) (AF)

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POLICY Paper

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ENROLLMENT POLICIES AND STUDENT ACCESS AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES

By Daniel J. Phelan

ED 439 763

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Introduction

Since their inception in the early 20th century, community colleges (for this paper, including community, junior and technical colleges) have served as "open-door," open-access institutions. For many students, community colleges are their first, best option. These students seek an associate's degree or a certificate in a particular career area, or they may be in pursuit of a four-year degree. Students whose ultimate goal is a baccalaureate degree may choose first to attend a community college to receive additional preparation, to save money, to remain close to home or simply because they do not feel ready to attend a large university.

For other students, however, the community college represents their best hope for a postsecondary education. For them, the community college may be an opportunity to start over or to improve their marketability in the workforce. A growing number of former welfare recipients enroll in community colleges seeking job skills that will lead to self-sufficiency.

Today, community colleges' "open door," which embodies a public policy commitment to broad and equal access to educational opportunity, is threatening to close. Declining public investments in higher education and concurrent rising enrollment demands jeopardize the democratic traditions upon which community colleges were founded. State leaders face difficult policy choices regarding access and enrollment at two-year institutions if this tradition is to survive. This Policy Paper explores a range of policy options for state policymakers to consider as they seek to formulate a 21st-century solution to enrollment management at community colleges.

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II Background

Community colleges' early history in expanding educational opportunity represents a uniquely American success story. Established in 1901, the first two-year "junior" colleges were dedicated to providing access and education to the mass population, often serving as a bridge between the high school and the university. After the Truman Commission report at the close of World War II, the concept of a "community college within commuting distance of every American" came into being. This institution was to provide not only the first two years of pre-baccalaureate education, but also career (i.e., vocational) education, continuing education, employee training and community service.

So successful were these new two-year institutions that demand and support for community colleges grew at exponential rates. The number of colleges increased from 20 institutions in 1909; to 667 in 1958; 1,091 in 1971; and then to 1,238 in 1991. In 1997-98 (the most recent years for which data are available), there were 1,092 public two-year institutions; 184 private, nonprofit two-year institutions; and an estimated 500 private, for-profit two-year institutions. Today, nearly every state has a community college within easy commuting distance of most its residents.

Enrollments also have spiraled upwards, growing from approximately 16,000 students in 1909 to more than 10.2 million students in 1997. According to the American Association of Community Colleges, approximately 5.2 million students sought credit instruction in 1994, while an additional five million students were pursuing training, retraining, capacity building or personal development instruction (i.e., noncredit activities). Community colleges currently enroll 44% of all undergraduates attending colleges and universities nationwide.

From all indications, enrollment demands at community colleges are likely to continue expanding well into the new century. Over the next decade, many states will experience explosive growth in the number of high school graduates, many of whom will look to the community college for initial access to four-year colleges and universities or for specialized vocational training. The demographic profile of these students increasingly will reflect the population's growing ethnic diversity and ever-widening range of socioeconomic backgrounds.

Likewise, community colleges will bear much of the responsibility for providing a burgeoning immigrant population with new employment skills and language and citizenship training. Additionally, the swelling numbers of adult learners at community colleges reflect a recognition that getting educated once is not enough in a knowledge-based economy. New careers and changing skill requirements mean workers continually need to retrain and retool.

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In the past, these demands for increased access were dealt with by increased state support, new campuses, increased tuition and fee charges, new programs and additional staff. But these recourses are less and less available today. In most states, state funds provide the largest share of public two-year institutions' total operating revenue. Based on an annual survey conducted by the Center for the Study of Education at Illinois State University, state appropriations for community colleges in fiscal year 2000 climbed an average of 7.9% over the previous year.

Although this represents the largest gain of the 1990s and the sixth straight year in which overall state support rose, community college leaders point out that it does not compensate for the enrollment growth that community colleges have experienced over the last 20 years (Schmidt, 1999). Since 1980, the state's overall share of support has slipped from one-half to slightly more than one-third of community college budgets; increased support from local and federal sources has not been enough to make up the difference. Nationally, operating revenues for a community college are generated from the following sources: state funds (39.4%), tuition and fees (19.9%), local funds (17.9%), federal funds (12.6%) and other sources (10.2%).

To fill the budget gap left by declines in state funding, many states and community colleges were forced to raise tuition during the early 1990s, even though this meant some students would be priced out of participation. The average annual tuition for a full-time student at a public community college in 1997-98 was $1,318, a 30% increase over 1991-92. Still, many people consider community colleges a bargain, especially when compared to the $3,110 and $13,392 average tuition charged, respectively, by public and private four-year institutions. But even with community colleges' low costs, financial aid is very important due, in part, to the limited finances of many enrolling students. Only 6.7% of community college students receive any state financial assistance, compared to 21.7% who receive some type of federal assistance (i.e., Pell grants or federal loans targeted at students and families with lower incomes).

III. Policy Options and Implications

Given anticipated new enrollment demands, declining state support and limits to what students can pay, community college officials and state policymakers face a difficult challenge in maintaining open and equal access to the colleges. If state leaders, however, want a coordinated and comprehensive postsecondary education system, a variety of options are available to help shape community college enrollment practice. These options include capping enrollment, tying funding to assessment of student performance rather than seat time, redefining overall funding strategies, testing and requiring remedial education, and prioritizing services for selected types of students.

Enrollment Option #1: *Limit enrollment and access by capping the number of students who can be accommodated on campus.*

While perhaps appealing as a short-term solution, capping enrollment by limiting the number of students for which a state will appropriate funds may be an undesirable political option in the long run. Much like sharply raising tuition, instituting enrollment caps can have a similar effect of potentially reducing access at a time when the population is growing. It is also a move likely to be wildly unpopular with a public that places a high premium on having accessible and affordable postsecondary education opportunities.

Capping enrollment and decreasing state support also may thwart the development of new program offerings and significantly reduce investments in new and emerging technologies for technical programs. As a consequence, community colleges may be unable to meet business and industry needs.

In order to fuel the state economy and workforce, ensure enrollments and provide for the education and training demanded by its constituencies, community colleges need to be responsive and relevant to the marketplace. One option state policymakers might consider is to target financial support to encourage the development of new instructional programs linked to the existing marketplace. Under such a plan, targeted funding could be directed, for example, toward helping community colleges conduct a comprehensive market analysis to determine constituent needs. Additional state-level support in the form of "seed capital" could help with start-up costs for new programs identified in the market analysis. Community colleges then could be charged with budgeting for the ongoing operations and maintenance of these new programs. Because the majority of career and vocational programs tend to be equipment intensive and represent a high cost to develop and operate, additional incentives may be required to encourage local business and industry to invest in instructional equipment for these new programs.

Collaborating with the Private Sector To Meet Constituent Needs

In Arizona, the Maricopa County Community College District has raised more than $10 million in cash and equipment from local corporations. For nearly two decades, the district has been setting up training programs, primarily in computer technology, for large area employers such as Motorola and Intel corporations. The companies often are asked to donate the equipment used in the training sessions. This ensures that the company's employees are using the most modern technology in their training, while making the technology available to all the district's students later.

Source: Van der Werf, Martin (1999, April 9). "For Community Colleges, Fund Raising Has Become Serious and Successful." The Chronicle of Higher Education.

Enrollment Option #2: *Tie legislative support for institutional accountability to the clarification of enrollment outcomes and assessment of student performance.*

State policymakers are demanding more accountability from public colleges and universities by tying at least part of their annual appropriations to how well these institutions perform according to various measures. By linking funding to institutional performance, state policymakers hope to gain a clearer sense of how the public's investment in higher education is being used, as well as help colleges strengthen their programs and improve their competitive edge. From all indications, this wave of reform is unlikely to recede anytime soon. Recent studies conducted by the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government reveal that 13 states require public colleges to meet certain conditions before they can receive state funds, and another 12 states are likely to follow suit within the next five years (Haworth, 1999).

Some states, such as South Carolina, set different standards for their two-year colleges than for their regional and research universities. In 1998, the Florida Legislature earmarked $24 million for performance-based bonuses for community colleges that provided increased remedial education, awarded more associate degrees and graduated students more quickly. Additionally, the Illinois Legislature in recent years asked its two-year colleges to prove their graduates can compete in the workforce or at four-year colleges. To reinforce the message, the legislature is tying 2% of state-appropriated community college funds to such factors as student satisfaction surveys, and graduation and employment rates.

It is important to bear in mind, however, that students enroll in community colleges for a variety of reasons. Some enroll only to obtain new skills in order to remain employable. Others already hold a college degree and want to remain current in their field. Other students enroll purely for personal growth or a specific interest. Many enroll part time, taking four to six years to complete a degree as they balance work and family responsibilities. On average nationally, only 20-30% of all enrollees at a community college complete their associate degree, transfer to a four-year institution and then go on to earn a baccalaureate degree. Consequently, under certain circumstances, achievement of an associate's degree makes little sense as a "performance goal" or "required outcome."

It is becoming increasingly difficult to categorize students given their dynamic needs and goals. Part of the solution from a public policy standpoint may be to require more accurate "value-added" indicators based on actual learner goals. Such systems could define incoming student goals and then evaluate their attainment both during students' experience with the community college and prior to their departure.

Developing Student Standards

During 1999, the League for Innovation in the Community College, a national network of influential community colleges, received a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts to develop standards for community college graduates. One goal of the project is to emphasize the measurement of certain skills, such as quantitative reasoning and problem solving, instead of stressing only earning grades and passing courses. A second goal is to build consensus about which skills should be included as core elements of their degree programs. A third goal is to make it easier for students who take nontraditional paths through higher education by making standards more uniform from one community college to the next.

Source: The Chronicle of Higher Education *(1999, September). "Pew Charitable Trusts Helps Community Colleges Set Standards."*

Enrollment Option #3: *Establish a coherent, strategic-based funding policy for community college operations.*

G. Soche may have stated the issue best in a *Chronicle of Higher Education* article: "States simply have too many fiscal obligations, too many special interests competing for scarce resources and too many debts to heed higher education's urgent plea for more money. . . . States have to reserve larger and larger chunks of their budgets for such things as Medicaid and prisons, for which the courts and laws require certain spending levels. That leaves higher education and other discretionary services to fight for an increasingly smaller plate of scraps."

A continued "discretionary-services" approach, as a number of states are following, likely will have a negative effect on the unique role community colleges play as open-door institutions. And the greatest impacts resulting from unstable and fluctuating levels of state funding will fall on the least-

advantaged persons. Data compiled by the American Association of Community Colleges (1998) reveal that students from underrepresented groups and low socioeconomic backgrounds are most likely to start their education at a community college rather than at a four-year institution.

The time is right for state policymakers and others in key leadership positions to reevaluate the nation's fundamental public policy commitment to accommodate broad and equal access to postsecondary education. One facet of this evaluation should center on whether postsecondary education is first and foremost a "public good" or a "private good." If it is deemed a private benefit, then a discretionary funding approach may be appropriate in light of competing budget demands. If, however, community college education is valued as a public benefit, as it has been viewed historically, then legislatures might consider guaranteeing a specific level of commitment toward that end. To do this, policymakers could identify the available funding sources for community college operations (e.g., local property taxes, state appropriations, tuition, fees, state tuition grants, etc.) and put them in the context of the total cost of educating a student. Once defined, a fixed and sustainable obligation percentage could be assigned for each.

In recent years, both states and community colleges have begun actively pursuing new sources of revenue. According to a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, nearly every community college in America has become a fundraiser, not only to supplement their operating budgets, but also to build endowments that will allow them to offer more scholarships (Van de Werf, 1999). To raise funds, community colleges are looking closer at the communities they serve, stressing their ties to business and tapping into local foundation agendas. The Community College of Denver, for example, derives more than one-third of its overall income — roughly the same amount it receives in state appropriations — from donations and grants.

States also are exploring new avenues to create or expand student aid programs. The success of Georgia's lottery-financed HOPE scholarship program has inspired many states. Other states, such as Nevada, are financing new merit-based scholarships with anticipated revenue from legal settlements with the nation's tobacco companies.

"Guaranteed" Levels of Funding

In Nebraska, state policymakers and college leaders are collaborating in trying to establish stable and equitable levels of funding for the state's community colleges. The Nebraska Community College Association, the State Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education, college presidents and state legislators have worked together to package a legislative proposal that sets state aid at 40% of the community college's budget. Another 40% would be obtained through local taxing authority, and the remaining 20% would come from tuition and other revenues. In addition, the legislation calls for the creation of a fund, supported with healthy tax bases of the more populated districts, to support remote districts, where the tax bases are low.

Enrollment Option #4: *Have community colleges provide developmental education (remedial — basic math, writing and reading instruction) for incoming students prior to their enrollment in college-level work as a way to reduce costs of remedial education.*

With a commitment to open access has come the need for remedial education (often referred to as developmental education). Since their inception, community colleges increasingly have assumed the remedial function, and most view it as part of their mission. Typically, community colleges employ the use of a standardized placement examination during enrollment to determine students' abilities to benefit from their education. Often, the results indicate that students need developmental-level instruction to bring them to a "college-ready" level of knowledge.

The inability of students to do college-level work has captured the attention of both policymakers and the public. Estimates are that 30-70% of incoming students may require some level of developmental education, the result either of poor precollege preparation or, in the case of adult students, skills forgotten over time. Developmental coursework credits seldom apply toward an associate degree, nor do they transfer to a baccalaureate-degree-granting institution.

In addition to concerns about the added cost of developmental education, state leaders and others have questioned whether having high numbers of students needing remediation dilutes the quality of education for their better-prepared classmates. Increasingly, states are phasing out or eliminating developmental education offered at many four-year institutions.

Ultimately, this enrollment pattern shifts more of the community college's dollars toward developmental education and away from other responsibilities. A recent study put the cost of providing remediation at an estimated $1 billion a year. David Breneman and William Haarlow (1999), the researchers who conducted the study, note that while considerable, this amount represents less than 1% of the $115 billion spent annually on higher education. They suggest policies on remediation need to be based not only on a close examination of the monetary costs, but also on a consideration of the consequences for individuals and society of choosing *not* to offer it. Experience has shown that without the use of placement examinations and subsequent remedial instruction, students are more likely to fail college-level instruction and eventually withdraw from the institution.

State policymakers have several options to consider regarding either reducing the need for remediation or dealing with it more efficiently. One option is they can require community colleges to offer developmental education only to returning adults, with high school graduates who require remediation being returned to their originating high school for additional preparation. The benefit of this option is that it minimizes the community college's budget drain on developmental activities. Local school districts, however, might consider this policy initiative an elitist approach they can ill afford.

Another, and perhaps more palatable, option would be to foster collaboration among college and high school faculty to link high school courses with the next level of courses at the community college. Public policy could direct state departments of education and state postsecondary entities to require these curricular connections. Decreased expenditures on remedial education for high school graduates could be one positive result. Community colleges likely would need to continue providing developmental education for the returning adult.

Alternatively, two-year institutions could outsource remediation to specialized, private organizations such as Sylvan Learning Systems or Kaplan Educational Centers. This option, being tried in Maryland and elsewhere, remains controversial and has yet to be evaluated in terms of its cost-savings and student success (Breneman and Haarlow, 1999).

Commitment to Remediation Pays Off

The Community College of Denver (CCD) has been recognized widely for its ability to recruit, retain and graduate a highly diverse and underprepared urban population. With nearly 60% of its students taking remedial classes, CCD provides one-third of all remedial instruction in the state's public institutions. So successful are its remediation efforts that degree-seeking students who take remedial courses at the college are slightly more likely to graduate or transfer to a four-year college than are their classmates who are not in remedial classes.

College leaders and administrators attribute the institution's success to several factors, including an innovative interdisciplinary remedial and student support program for first-generation college students and a heavy reliance on tutoring and individual attention. They also cite the existence of a campus culture that views remediation as a challenge rather than as a burden. Faculty are given time to tutor students one-on-one in remedial labs, which all students in remedial classes must attend at least once a week. Additionally, CCD has given one department the responsibility for overseeing all operations related to developmental education, a move considered crucial for reaching students and tracking progress.

Source: Hebel, Sara (1999, May 7). "Community College of Denver Wins Fans with Ability To Tackle Tough Issues." The Chronicle of Higher Education.

Enrollment Option #5: *Restrict or prioritize enrollment for students who already possess associate's, bachelor's, master's and even doctorate degrees.*

In California and other states, where community colleges are facing new access demands and limited public resources, proposals to prioritize student enrollments have been the subject of heated debate. Under such a plan, community college access would be restricted for students currently possessing a degree, by virtue of limiting state subsidies for degree-holders. Proponents of this approach argue that, compared to first-time students, students already holding a college degree are better suited financially and educationally to pay for the entire cost related to their post-degree instruction at a community college. A positive implication of prioritizing enrollment is the reduction in the level of state aid provided to community colleges for students with a degree. Limiting access to first-time college students also would ensure that these students have access to career programs and enhanced employability as a result.

Lifelong learning, however, is virtually a requirement for the nation to remain globally competitive. Thwarting the skill upgrading of individuals who return to the community college for additional instruction would appear counter-productive. Although a "first-time students first, all others second" strategy may result initially in savings, the loss of worker productivity ultimately could result in lower or lost wages, meaning fewer income tax revenues to the state. As a practical matter, it would be difficult to determine whose education should be prioritized and what group should determine the priority rankings. Further, the prioritization solution, in addition to limiting retraining, also could limit development of the person interested in recreational or personal enrichment education.

As a public policy matter, state policymakers might want to consider the broader issue of role and mission of their state community colleges. Community colleges serve five primary functions as part of their mission: transfer of students to four-year colleges, technical and occupational education, remediation, training for business and industry, and community service. In addition, policymakers in a number of states are considering whether to allow community colleges to begin granting baccalaureate degrees as well. Yet, the notion of a comprehensive community college, which is "all things to all people," may not be viable in a constantly changing economy. State policymakers may need to consider whether some community colleges, in order to provide efficiently a high-quality and affordable education, ought to concentrate on filling a particular "niche" in the marketplace. More important, state policymakers may need to consider whether the public policy commitment to broad and equal educational opportunity is still a sustainable option.

IV Policy Questions

When evaluating options for maintaining access to community colleges, policymakers should consider several questions.

1. Do the legislative and executive branches of state government share a vision for the community college's mission upon which new policies can be built?

2. Has there been an audit or analysis of state policies to determine whether or not conflicts regarding the community college and its mission exist?

3. Should a guaranteed level of state funding be designated in order to assure access? If so, what is the appropriate level of support? Is there a clear understanding of who should bear or share the cost of educating a student?

4. For accountability purposes, how is "return on investment" established and communicated to taxpayers and the public?

5. Is there a shared view of the community college's function? Should community colleges be encouraged to move from a comprehensive institution, one that is "all things to all people," to one that focuses on a particular niche?

6. Should state aid follow a prioritization of community college students (e.g., first-time enrolling students first, GED students second, returning degree students third, developmental education fourth, etc.)?

V Conclusion

Without question, community colleges are a unique American success story. They have played a vital role in this country with their mission as an "open-door" institution. The combination of their success tied to the changing needs of society, which has led to new enrollment demands and constrained public resources, will continue to generate ongoing challenges for legislators and community college administrators alike. The time has come to open meaningful policy-option discussions to recognize and increase the value of community colleges to the states they serve.

VI Additional Resources

The following resources may further assist the reader in formulating specific policy decisions.

1. For information about the Nebraska proposal to set a fixed contribution of state aid at 40% of the community college's budget, another 40% from local taxes and 20% from tuition and other revenues, contact the Nebraska Community College Association, 601 S. 12th Street, Suite 200, Lincoln, NE 68508; phone: 402-417-4685; fax: 402-417-4762.

2. Community colleges in Arizona seek to offer baccalaureate degrees for vocational/technical programs not currently offered by universities. For additional information on these community colleges, contact Donald Puyear, executive director of the State Board of Directors for Community Colleges of Arizona; 602-255-4037, or see www.stbd.cc.az.us.

3. In California, the state has sought to determine the prioritization of students who should use the community college, by virtue of limiting state subsidies for degree-holders. For more information, contact the Chancellor's Office, California Community Colleges, 1107 Ninth Street, Sacramento, CA 95814-3607; fax: 916-445-875, or see www.cpec.ca.gov.

4. The Maricopa Community Colleges (Phoenix, Arizona), together with the National Science Foundation, developed a program entitled the Phoenix Urban Systemic Initiatives that aligns math and science curricula among K-12, community colleges and universities in the Phoenix inner city. Contact Ernesto Ramirez, director of the Office of Public School Programs; phone: 480-731-8050 or 480-731-8053.

5. The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) can provide assistance and access to public policy research involving enrollment trends and implementation strategies. Contact WICHE, P.O. Drawer P, Boulder, CO 80301-9752, or see www.wiche.edu.

6. The Pew Higher Education Roundtable organization can provide help in evaluating enrollment management policy. Contact the Institute for Research on Higher Education, 4200 Pine Street, 5A, Philadelphia, PA 19104-4090, or see www.irhe.upenn.edu.

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